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Myth 18: It Is Fair to Teach All Children the Same Way

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From their earliest years, human beings are familiar with the concept of fairness. Mothers who exhort their children to “play fair” demonstrate fairness themselves when dividing a family dessert into equal portions. At the restaurant, Sam’s lunch must look identical to Joe’s because they’ve ordered the same item. Employers apply the “equal pay for equal work” rule and implement “across the board” changes in the workplace. Terms such as *parity* and *seniority* are likewise related to the concept of fairness, and rewards are documented thoroughly to satisfy the watchdogs guarding the “fairness gauge.” In sports, too, cries of “foul play” are all about fairness. Tempers flare at the umpire’s decision in favor of Team X and not Team Y. “Not fair!” chant spectators as a result.

Fairness, as these examples imply, is often considered synonymous with equality: the equal treatment of people sharing a uniform description or role. Siblings playing together, family members awaiting dessert, cooks standardizing the size and appearance of a given menu item, employees with the same job rank, sports teams—these groups comprise members who relinquish their individual differences to a large extent for the good of the group as a whole.

This concept—“fair” means “equal”—has spawned the notion that it is fair to teach all children the same way. Put simply, if fairness means equality in family life, restaurant dining, and sports—not to mention in observing codes of behavior imposed by museums, places of worship, libraries, and various other venues, then, why wouldn’t it be fair to consider all students in a given class as “equal?” Aren’t they also a group?

Fairness = Equality: Fact or Myth?

Groups are characterized by a broad brush, reducing each member’s uniqueness to a common denominator. As social human beings and depending on our

own personal style and needs, we join clubs, choirs, literary guilds, and other groups; take classes; help charities, and so forth. Group membership fills a need for social interaction, for which we willingly don the mantle of “group member,” assuming equality of all participants.

Doesn’t it follow, then, that all members of a given group are of equal status while in that group? With the emphasis on the group’s sameness as opposed to members’ individual differences, the group often achieves its goals efficiently, effectively, and economically in terms of time and resources. Any variety in outcomes is generally planned and purposeful, and the members’ collective efforts pay dividends that satisfy the group as a whole. Wouldn’t this blueprint work well in schools?

Although the homogeneity of group members may assume a certain equality of status while together, this assumption is *not valid* for a class of students. What’s more, every parent, student, and effective teacher knows it. Parents know their children’s individual strengths as well as their weaknesses. Students know what they do well and what they don’t do as well. And teachers with a strong professional preparation are equipped with the knowledge, a wide range of defensible instructional techniques, and the specific tools needed to meet the learning needs of *each student* as an *individual learner*.

For teachers of students of any age and ability, these professional characteristics are essential. Teachers who consider their class as a single group rather than as multiple individuals teach their students as though only one student were present with 25 exact copies of him or her in the other seats! This is *not* responsible teaching. Furthermore, this single,

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completely impersonal one-size-fits-all approach is *not fair*.

We began this discussion by pointing out that “fair” is often construed to mean “equal,” but for teaching children this equation is not valid. Learning is a highly personal process that each student experiences alone; we must respect these youngsters’ individual differences. Regardless of whether students learn in small groups, large groups, or with hundreds of other students in a huge lecture hall, the actual cerebral process of learning is unique to the student acquiring the knowledge, skills, and/or dispositions inherent in a particular topic.

Each student, then, approaches learning differently from other students, applying his or her initiative, spontaneity, creativity, and independence as a thinker (Brady, 2009). He or she devises mnemonics and other tools to retain what is being learned, relates his or her newly acquired information to concepts learned earlier, develops a system for retrieving this new knowledge when needed, and uses appropriately what he or she now knows and understands about the topic. This self-regulation process is unique to each student; thus, if we accept the position that it’s fair to teach all children the same way, we are perpetuating a dangerous myth.

Meeting Individual Needs: Fair?

A myopic belief within this myth is that, by using instructional approaches, materials, and assessment mechanisms particularly appropriate for students of high ability, educating gifted children is elitist. This charge reflects the anti-intellectualism movement in America that raises its ugly head from time to time. Regrettably, some educators share the position that gifted education is elitist and perpetuate the myth that fairness is achieved in the classroom only by teaching all children the same way. Those who believe this know nothing about bright students—who they are as individual human beings, how they think and process new information, their need for self-discovery, and what their goals are for applying their talents to real-world issues.

If we think of “fair” as “equal,” we need to realize that fair *isn’t always* equal. To equate “fair” with “just,” however, puts us on the right track: Teaching children according to their individual abilities is a *just* practice based on one’s *right*.

So, if teaching all children the same way isn’t fair or just, what’s the alternative? Education should aim to elevate *each* student to the level of his or her maximum ability—and do so in an atmosphere of genuine respect, integrity, trust, and compassion, to name only some of the nonnegotiables of the defensible differentiation (Tomlinson, BrimiJoin, & Narvaez, 2008) teachers must use to connect with each student individually.

Gifted students’ learning needs are less quantitative than qualitative; how we teach these youngsters requires instructional and assessment strategies geared specifically to advanced learners. These students need, primarily, to learn how to think. Many make high grades consistently but “freeze” when facing a “what if” situation; they need firsthand experience in solving real-world problems that do not necessarily have known answers. Feeding these students more of the same denies them opportunities to learn much-needed skills. Fair?

High-ability students need to think critically and creatively, using complex thinking skills of critical analysis, forecasting, creating performance criteria, inventing, and evaluating evidence, for example. We must add pace, depth, and complexity to our curricula and immerse our gifted students in the big ideas of an area of study—its generalizations, principles, theories, and themes (Kaplan, 2001). Is it fair to withhold these opportunities to stimulate advanced students’ thinking abilities?

Summary

Debating the world’s big ideas; participating in Socratic seminars on complex topics; discussing ethics, abuses to humanity (e.g., starvation, plague, child mutilation) and other issues critical to civilization—these strategies, essential for developing leaders, must be integrated into our high-ability secondary students’ education. Unlike some of their classmates, advanced-level learners relish pursuing open-ended questions about issues of consequence; thought-provoking discourse is a challenge these students often welcome.

Highly able primary-aged students also require specific modifications to standard curricula; many 4- and 5-year-olds are entering school as competent readers and/or proficient in basic math. Is it fair to ignore these young “high fliers” by insisting they

read the same stories and do the same math as classmates not as advanced as they—just because they are in the same classroom? Does every patient in Dr. Z's office on Tuesday need the same remedy?

No. To teach all children the same way is patently *not fair!* A child is an individual with a unique history, ability to learn, and personal style of doing so. Teachers must respect the differences that distinguish one child from another and respond positively to each one's learning needs.

No two children are equal. As Aristotle—and, later, Thomas Jefferson—observed so astutely, “Nothing is so unequal as the equal treatment of unequals.”

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Carolyn R. Cooper, PhD, is best known as an administrator of programs for gifted and talented students in several states and districts. She has worked in gifted education in a Connecticut regional education service center, has administered a large Javits grant, and has directed gifted education for the State of Maryland. She has also served as an assistant superintendent. Now retired, she volunteers her service as a presenter on gifted education issues to parents and teachers, is an advisor to district and university programs, and writes “The Buzz” for the National Association for Gifted Children's (NAGC's) *Parenting for High Potential* as well as an administrators' column in the *Gifted Education Communicator*, published quarterly by the California Association for The Gifted. She authored the budget chapter in NAGC's guidebook, *Designing Services and Programs for High-Ability Learners* and, as an active member of NAGC, is helping plan the 2009 NAGC convention to be held in St. Louis, where she resides.